

A Place to Grow: the Fresh Start Center

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ABBREVIATIONS AND GLOSSARY

ADATABASE. Format for the storage of electronic data.

Adult Included TANF Case. A TANF case in which the parent (or other adult) receives a benefit for the needs of the children and for themselves. Adult receipt of a benefit brings requirement for work activities. See also Child Only TANF Case and Work Activity.

AFDC. Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the federally funded, state administered, cash assistance welfare program before July 1, 1997. See also TANF.

Assistance. Cash benefit paid to needy families. Other non-cash services may also be considered assistance. Some benefits and services are not considered assistance when the adult is employed with earnings.

Barrier. Situations that pose an impediment to a TANF client. Common problems include lack of reliable transportation and child care. Language skills, job history, lack of education, substance abuse, and health status are other areas that interfere with obtaining self-sufficiency.

Benefit. Cash, in-kind services given to a family, or reimbursements paid to a third party for the support of a needy family.

Case. In economic assistance programs case refers to a household or family unit. A TANF case includes the deprived children and their parent(s) or caretaker. See also Client.

Case Manager, TANF. In the pilot project, a staff person whose duties include bringing together a variety of support services and social service professionals toward the improvement of a TANF family's circumstances. See also Eligibility Worker.

Child Only TANF Case. TANF cases with no parent present may receive payments only for the needs of the children, not the adult who is caring for the child (ren). There is no work requirement for the adults in Child Only cases. See also Adult Included TANF Case.

Client. In economic assistance programs client refers to an individual. Together clients may make up a case. See also Case.

DB2. A format for the storage of electronic data.

Eligibility Worker. County social service agency staff that processes TANF applications, calculates benefits, develops supportive relationships with TANF clients, and verifies documentation. See also Case Manager, TANF.

JOBS. Job Opportunity and Basic Skills program is an adjunct to the TANF program wherein TANF clients are involved in actions leading to paid employment.

Job Tracker. Originally a Fresh Start Center staff person who would work closely with clients who needed help to overcome barriers and crises. As implemented these duties were distributed to the TANF Case Manager and the JOBS Coordinator.

Leaver. Refers to a person who has left the TANF program.

MH/SA. Mental Health and Substance Abuse counseling services are often discussed in tandem.

Pilot Project. Local variations in the administration of the TANF program to test alternative policies before possible use in the statewide program.

PRWORA. Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, commonly known as Welfare Reform, was signed into law on August 26, 1996 creating the TANF program. See also TANF.

Recidivism. When, after leaving TANF, a family re-applies and returns to receiving TANF benefits.

Referral. Eligibility for TANF depends on the family fulfilling mandatory referrals to other programs, especially the JOBS program. Other, non-mandatory referrals direct families to needed services.

Sanction. TANF clients who do not participate in required work activities may be penalized by a reduction of benefits or the closure of the TANF case.

Self-Sufficiency. A family's ability to provide for its needs. For the purpose of this study and for TANF program administration, self-sufficiency is defined as non-receipt of TANF. Under this definition a family may still be eligible for other economic assistance such as Food Stamps. See also Barrier.

TANF. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the cash assistance welfare program in effect since July 1, 1997 in North Dakota. See also PRWORA.

TECS. Technical Eligibility Computer System. Mainframe based system used to process several economic assistance programs, especially Food Stamps.

TEEM. Training, Education, Employment, and Management program. This was the welfare reform experiment conducted in North Dakota starting in 1996 under a waiver to the AFDC program granted by U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Eleven counties participated. Policies in the TEEM program shared similarities with the pilot project that is the subject of this report. Replaced by TANF beginning July 1, 1997.

Vision System. Client server based, next generation, information system currently used for the administration of the TANF program and parts of the Medicaid program.

Welfare. Often a generic term for government support for individuals and families. Within social services administration, the term, welfare, might refer only to the cash assistance TANF program.

Welfare Reform. Refers to changes in administration of welfare programs, especially cash assistance, with greater emphasis on work. Reform began with experimentation on the state level and growing to the passage of federal legislation creating the TANF program in 1996. Efforts continue through state initiative such as pilot projects. See also PRWORA.

Work Activity. A requirement of welfare reform is for the client to be involved in activities intended to lead to, and include, paid employment. Activities might include job search, basic skills training, work experience activities, on-the-job training, and employment. For some clients work activities could involve efforts to address health problems.

ABSTRACT

From local initiative primarily by the county social service agency, the JOBS contractor, and the community college, a unique, one-stop center was created in the midst of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa reservation to provide strong case management services to select TANF clients. Otherwise following standard TANF policies, clients served by the center appeared to have improved earnings and less TANF use after their interaction with the Fresh Start program compared to other clients.

SUMMARY

For over 60 years, the traditional welfare program, most recently known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), provided cash assistance to needy families with dependent, deprived children. In 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was signed into federal law, eliminating the old AFDC program and replacing it with the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. The new law also allowed states to design their own TANF programs and granted them the authority to test policy changes.

North Dakota created several pilot projects. In Belcourt on the Turtle Mountain reservation, a one-stop center was initiated as a pilot project. The Fresh Start Center (FSC) combined eligibility determination of the county social services office with job search capacities and JOBS program case management by Job Service North Dakota (JSND), and an education component involving the Turtle Mountain Community College.

The model developed by the steering committee was to provide all the required services at one location. Further, clients were involved either in a semester long skills review course or a work/job search track.

Department of Human Services pilot projects have, as a fundamental feature—**case management—the coordinated involvement of the county social service agency, JSND and local service providers targeted to client needs and with the goal of self-sufficiency.**

In this, the Fresh Start Center was the same as other pilot projects. Additionally, there was monitoring and follow-up with clients in a Job Tracker/Job Coach function carried out by both the TANF Case Manager and the JOBS Coordinator.

Pilot Project Approach and Study Method

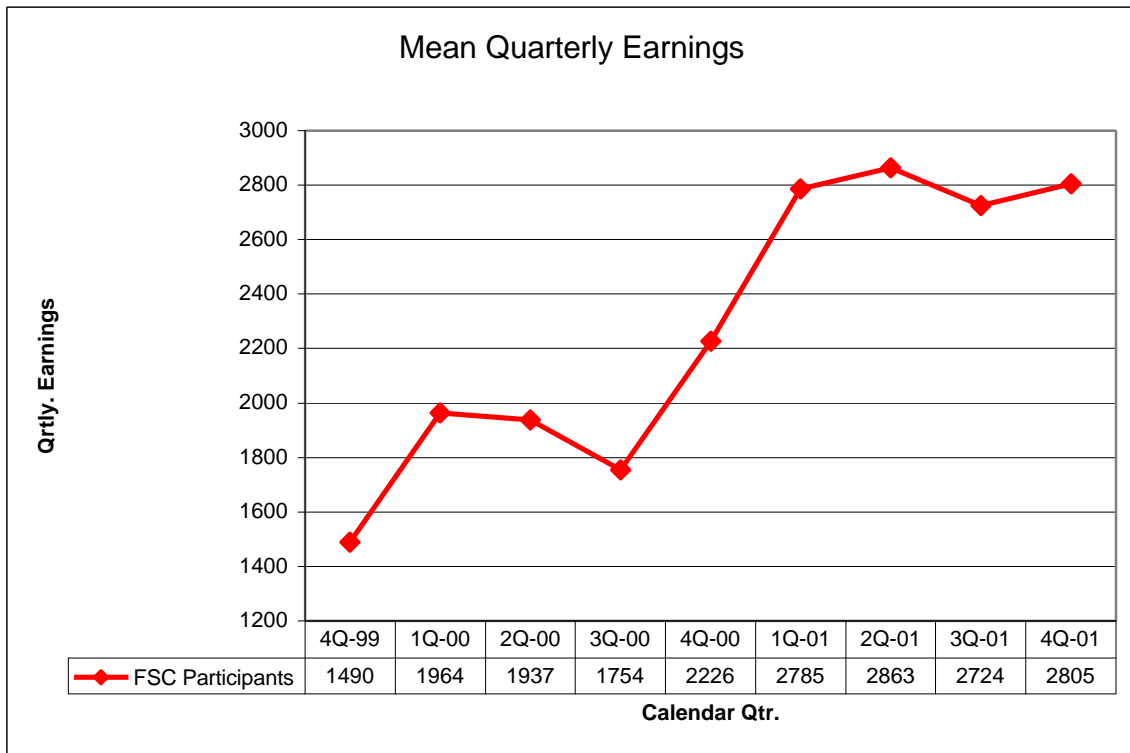
The pilot was developed locally but coordinated by the ND Department of Human Services starting July 1999.

Evaluation is meant to determine whether the pilot project worked as intended, provide details of project administration, communicate findings to interested groups, and provide details as a foundation for possible replication of policy alternatives into other areas of the state. The approach for this study was developed in the planning process and relies on a randomly chosen comparison group of TANF clients against whom the Fresh Start Center participants' outcomes are weighed. Also, FSC participants are observed over time from their period of involvement at the Center through one year post involvement by tracking earnings and monitoring any follow-up use of TANF.

Direct input from clients came in the form of a focus group discussion conducted by the author and through customer satisfaction surveys covering aspects of both the facility and programming.

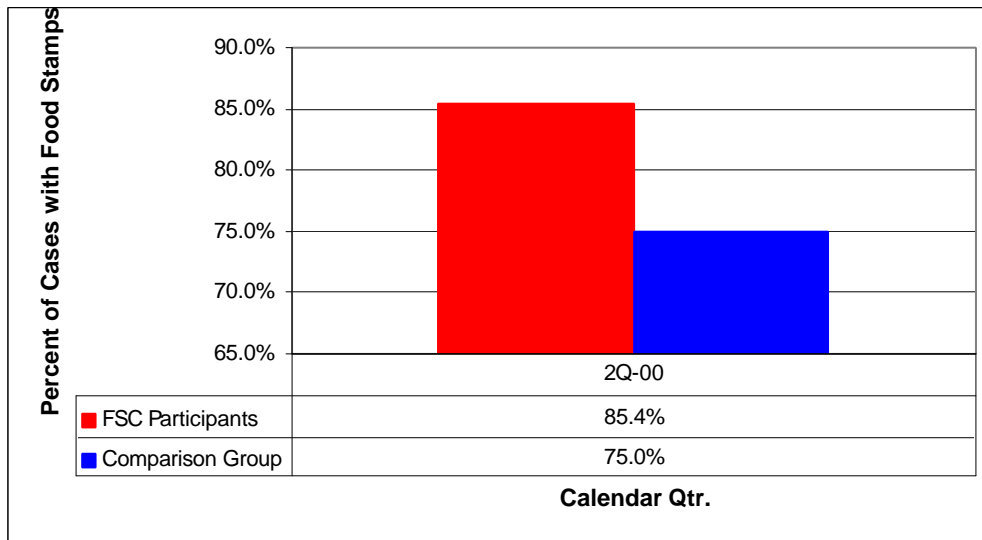
Key Findings

- ✓ **Clients left TANF at about the same rate. FSC participants left at a rate of 57.4% and Non-FSC clients at 61.8% within one year.**
- ✓ **One year after leaving TANF, FSC participants were more likely still to be off TANF.**
 - 77.8% of FSC participants still off one year later
 - 55.9% of Non-FSC clients still off one year later
- ✓ **Fresh Start clients had fewer sanctions before their participation.**
 - 8.3% of FSC participants had sanctions before the study period
 - 16.1% of Non-FSC clients had sanctions before the study period
- ✓ **During the Fresh Start period, clients in the program received fewer sanctions.**
 - 18.8% of FSC participants were sanctioned
 - 44.6% of Non-FSC clients were sanctioned
- ✓ **Fresh Start participants saw improved earnings after their involvement.**



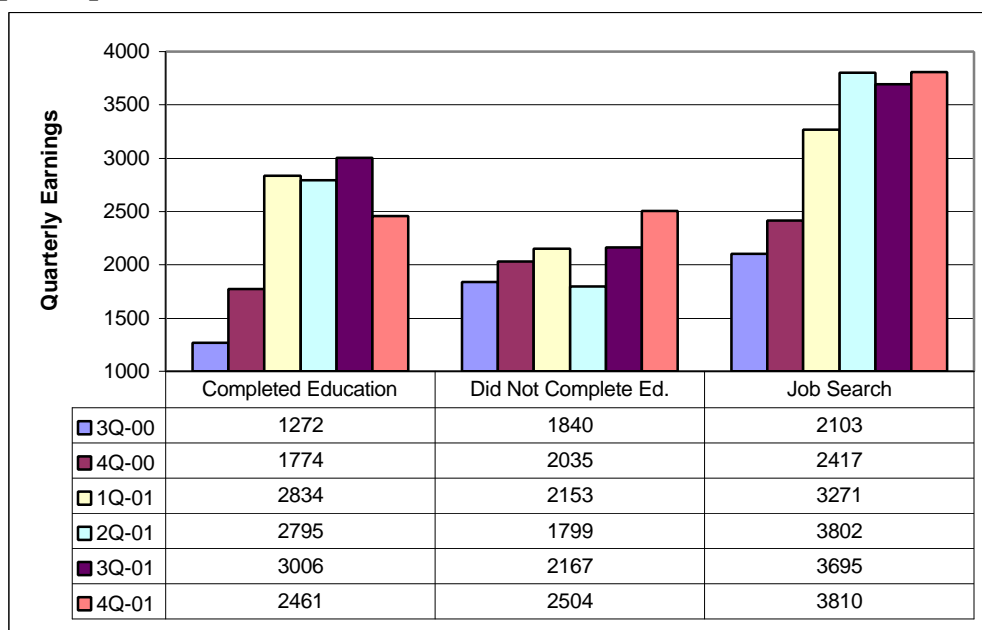
The chart shows that after a slow start during the Fresh Start period in which many clients were engaged in an education course, clients saw improved earnings for the year following.

- ✓ **Four quarters after the beginning of Fresh Start those involved in the Center were more likely to still use Food Stamps.**



Initially under welfare reform, many families left all forms of assistance when leaving TANF, even though they remained eligible for non-cash assistance. While complete freedom from reliance on economic assistance programs is a desirable outcome, prematurely ending non-cash assistance means a greater decrease in family resources not replaced by earnings during the transition to full self-sufficiency. The sudden reduction in resources when leaving all assistance may contribute to instability and recidivism to the cash assistance TANF program. Continued use of Food Stamps by Fresh Start Center participants after closing their TANF cases is viewed as contributing to a smoother, and likely, more permanent transition to self-sufficiency.

- ✓ **Over time, the Job Search/Work group had the best earnings among FSC participants.**



- ✓ **Clients said the location of the Center was its best feature.**
- ✓ **Clients in the Classroom portion said that learning about different jobs was the most useful subject matter covered.**

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Fresh Start Center pilot project seemed to help clients already motivated. It gives them an extra boost and may provide a focused path off welfare. The FSC had only 48 participants during the period observed. With such a small sample there are only weak correlations. Larger numbers and a better controlled experimental design would be needed to definitively establish the pilot project's causal impact. The Center did establish a working one-stop facility demonstrating its feasibility and overcoming the challenges to making it work. These process experiences would be useful in creating a similar center elsewhere.

Clients involved in the work/job search component had stronger earnings to begin with and made the best gains. This group likely had better skills and received the case management and Job Tracker/Job Coach services.

Recommendations:

- **Keep the Fresh Start Center functioning.** The availability of a program provides clients, who have some amount of self-motivation, a path off TANF.
- **Serve people in the work/job search component.** The program should focus on the services of the Job Tracker whether as a separate position or with those duties given to other staff.
- **Have mental health counseling available from the Fresh Start Center.** Coordinate with the Lake Region Human Service Center or other providers to make services available to clients in the Belcourt area even when the case management resides in the Rolla County social service office.
- **Establish a stronger management structure for the Center.**
- **For future projects, use a stronger evaluation design with random assignment of individuals to test and control groups.**
- **Conduct a study that includes surveys and interviews with TANF clients, especially those who have been sanctioned.** This would supplement secondary data analysis from administrative systems with a real client voice. Consider the possibility of utilizing Quality Control staff that currently interviews economic assistance clients.
- **Perform a cost benefit analysis.** Develop analytical skills to discuss projects, policies, and special services in cost-benefit terms.

- **Involve evaluation staff in the early planning stages of pilot projects.** Better define goals, objectives and select appropriate measures.
- **Explore ways to improve coordination of services and benefits among all economic assistance programs.**

1. INTRODUCTION AND PILOT PROJECT FEATURES

1.1 Welfare Reform in North Dakota

The federal program for cash support payments to families with children was created in 1937 as part of the Social Security Act. Initially assisting widows with children, as family structures changed, the program increasingly grew to provide an entitlement to families with deprived children. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, there were calls to reform a welfare system seen by some as promoting dependency and by others as inadequate for the proper care of children. These conflicting concerns along with tight budgets stalled major changes (Weaver 2000). By the mid-1990s, the states were increasingly interested in exploring options to the traditional welfare program—Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The federal government granted a number of waivers allowing these experiments.

North Dakota also received a waiver for the Training, Employment, Education and Management (TEEM) program implemented in 1996 (ND TEEM Waiver 1994). This was the start of welfare reform in North Dakota. TEEM program highlights are listed below, some of which were revived for use in the Fresh Start Center and other pilot projects.

- Case Manager as Service Coordinator
- Screening and Referrals
- Case Management
- Bundled benefit including cashing out other economic assistance programs
- Client required to be involved in work, training, or education
- Progressive sanction for non-participation

In that same year, the U.S. Congress took up the ongoing debate at the national level on reforming welfare. On August 26, 1996 president Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) creating a new welfare program, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Many of the changes allowed under the AFDC waiver and included in North Dakota's TEEM program were now part of the federal law. Major aspects of TANF include (PRWORA 1996):

- 60-month life-time limit on assistance to adults;
- Work requirements with 30 hour per week average for most adults;
- End of entitlement;
- Lump sum block grant to states;
- State policy options; state flexibility; and,
- State ability to operate differing programs and pilot projects.

When TANF was created the TEEM program was underway only in selected test counties. In some sense, North Dakota was fortunate to have a program, set of policies, and an administrative information computer system in place that, together, were capable of delivering benefits and services under the new TANF program. So, TANF rolled out statewide as the cash assistance welfare program starting July 1, 1997 built on the TEEM pilot project.

1.2 Pilot Projects

With the effort to conform to the new law the experimental nature of TEEM was lost. Those anxious to test new approaches to case management and bundled services and benefits could only partly realize their desires in the statewide TEEM program that now carried the strong stamp of national TANF law. In the rush to conform, much of the case management and bundled services approach was lost. Most eligibility workers continued primarily to administer benefits by gathering and processing documents, doing verification, and interfacing with the computer information system now known as Vision. Some added functions crept in such as performing an automated screening for client needs and making referrals to some services. Case management was not emphasized.

With completion of the conversion to TANF by December 1999, the administrative adjustment to the new paradigm was also complete. Next was the challenge of making the program work better. The welfare reform law allowed states much flexibility in the design of their programs and the authority to operate different programs within the state as a means of testing policy options.

North Dakota was ready to try other things. Three pilot projects were authorized beginning late in 1999. The first was the Fresh Start Center in Belcourt, North Dakota; it served only a small portion of the local TANF clientele in a one-stop service setting. Two other projects, similar to each other and located in Cass and Williams counties, adopted like policies wherein all adults included in TANF grants were subject to the policy in the pilot project. Those projects were evaluated in a report titled *Beyond Welfare: Cass and Williams Counties' Pilot Projects* (NDDHS 2003).

Since the initial period of pilot project development, other projects were created and have yet to undergo evaluation. These include Benson County, Grand Forks County's Mentor program, and the Southeast Regional Services Project.

Figure 1. North Dakota's TANF Pilot Projects

	Project Location	Group Involved	Start Date	Major Elements	Evaluation Date
1.	Fresh Start Center	Selected individuals at reservation site	July 1999	One-stop service center, intensive case management, training/education	September 2003
2.	Williams County	All Adult Included TANF cases	March 2000	Joint case management; strict sanction policy; co-location; mentor	Aug 4, 2003
3.	Cass County	All Adult Included TANF cases	August 2000	Joint case management; co-location, mental health services	Aug 4, 2003
4.	Mentor Program Grand Forks	Hardest to serve cases	July 2000	Joint case management; wrap around services	Late 2003 (tentative)
5.	Benson County	All Adult Included TANF cases	August 2001	One-stop services on reservation, training/education; strict sanctions; employment incentives	2004
6.	Southeast Region	All Adult Included TANF cases	August 2002	Bring HSC services to TANF cases in outlying counties	Late 2003

Source: ND DHS Public Assistance Division, Planning documents and status reports for individual pilot projects.

1.3 Fresh Start Center - Background

This report discusses the pilot project in Belcourt, North Dakota called the Fresh Start Center. Belcourt, located in Rolette County, is eleven miles south of the Canadian border and has a population of about 2,440. The county has a population of 13,674. Belcourt is the administrative center of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Reservation. Approximately, 7000 live on the reservation and trust lands around Belcourt (U.S. Census Bureau).

An average of 777 families per month received over \$ 3.6 million in 2002 through the TANF program. This represents about 25% of the total caseload in North Dakota (Getsman 2002). Rolette County has the highest caseload of any county in the state.

The local economy has relatively few jobs. The welfare reform law imposed a 60-month lifetime limit for the receipt of TANF except for Indian reservations with an unemployment rate over 50%. For most months since the inception of TANF, the 60-month lifetime limit has not applied in Rolette County.

Common to all the pilot projects is a strong element of local initiative. The eligibility staff, supervisors, and those from other community resource agencies developed the programs. Input from the Department included technical assistance regarding legal and administrative issues, additional financial resources, facilitation of planning discussions, and evaluation.

A Fresh Start Center planning committee was created to assess the suggested program changes received from individuals and organizations.

Alex Albert, Manager, Rolla Office, Job Service ND (JSND)
Janice Azure, Director of Tribal Work Experience and Training Program, Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa (TMBC)
DeAnn Berg, Assistant Manager for Employment and Application Services, JSND
Dinah Breland, Director of BIA Social Services, BIA, Belcourt, ND
Brenda Davis, Vocational Development Specialist, BIA, Belcourt, ND
Kevin Iverson, Director of TEEM Division, ND Department of Human Services
Dan Jerome, Member of the Tribal Council, TMBC
Betty Keegan, Director, Rolette County Social Services
Roy LaFontaine, Member of the Tribal Council, TMBS
Jon Martinson, Director of Marketing, Bismarck State College
John Opp, TANF Pilot Program Facilitator, ND Department of Human Services
Bermelia St. Claire, Director of Turtle Mountain Tribal NEW Jobs Program, TMBC
Sheila Trotter, Director of Vocational Training, Turtle Mountain Community College

The primary concern of the project planners was to provide a more client friendly environment for service delivery. The location of services in Rolla was viewed as a hindrance to clients. Though only six miles away, many clients do not have their own cars so the distance is a barrier. Additionally, with Belcourt on the reservation, planners believed the location of county social services, job search resources, education, and case management among the Indian clients served, not only addressed the distance barrier but other barriers, real and perceived, for Indian clients going off the reservation to a mostly Euro-American, border community.

In addition, although Rolla, population 1,254, is not a large city, services are not at the same location, causing further impediments.

The planning committee saw as the underlying concerns:

- Transportation to Rolla;
- A secure, nourishing environment in which to deliver the “work first” message of TANF;
- Remedial basic skills training and education aimed at improved employability; and,
- More intensive case management to keep clients moving forward and making connections to other needed services.

The Fresh Start Center was narrowly focused on a certain type of TANF client. Specifically, it targeted adult included cases, i.e., where the adult (usually the parent) caretaker was included in the TANF grant and thus subject to the work requirements; and, who was not involved with the Tribal Native Employment and Work (NEW) program, the tribally administered program similar to the state administered JOBS program and who had a high school diploma or Graduate Equivalence Diploma (GED). The criteria were relaxed as the program progressed and those working on a GED were accepted.

Unlike other pilot projects, the Fresh Start Center did not apply an alternative set of eligibility policies to its participants. The sanction policy, for example, remained the same as the standard, state policy as did other policies. The purpose of the Fresh Start Center was to demonstrate a

method of service delivery with increased case management. There was no larger goal of reducing overall TANF caseloads.

County caseload information provided in Figure 2 illustrates the background environment during which the FSC operated. Both state and county caseloads showed a dramatic reduction during the mid-1990s, although somewhat less so in Rolette County. Caseloads have moved upward during the recession beginning March 2000.

Figure 2. Milestones in Welfare Caseloads

Milestone	North Dakota	Rolette County
Highest AFDC Case Count – Monthly Average for 1993	5,995 Cases	915 Cases
TANF Cases at the start of TANF July 1997	3,859	881
Start of Pilot Project – July 1999	2,979	778
Lowest TANF Case Count – February 2000	2,742	710
December 2002	3,288	796

Source: ND DHS Research and Statistics Division. Monthly TANF Report.

1.4 Pilot Project Components

1.4.1 Agency Collaboration

Case management as the focus of the pilot project means the involvement of agencies and staff that provides TANF services to the family. A joint approach coordinates efforts. In addition, it ended the practice by some clients of playing one staff person against another. Particularly important is the stronger tie between the JOBS Coordinator and the eligibility staff that now work in the same office. Rather than just handing the client off to the JOBS Coordinator, the eligibility staff maintains a close tie to the progress of the case and attends staffing meetings with other service providers involved. The clients come to see the staff as a team working for them (Focus group 2002).

Part of the joint approach is a joint paper assessment. The system based assessment required for TANF is often completed based on the responses to the paper assessment. The paper assessment is given to more than Fresh Start clients and is used to help identify potential Fresh Start participants. Both the TANF case manager and the JOBS coordinator review assessments.

1.4.2 One Stop Service Center

The centerpiece of the pilot project is the actual physical location of the Fresh Start Center. A site, a former community college building, in downtown Belcourt was procured and refurbished. The work and planning resulted in a pleasant facility with an array of services. At the Fresh Start Center, a TANF client can meet with county social service staff on TANF eligibility issues and other economic assistance programs; a JOBS

coordinator is on site; and, computers are available for job search, resume preparation and training. In addition, the training/education course work is largely done at the center.

1.4.3 Job Tracker

This component represents a strong enhancement in case management. With the small number of clients participating in the Fresh Start Center, providing individually tailored case management was the plan. Upon development of an individual plan geared toward client self-sufficiency, the Job Tracker would go to work with the client on implementation.

A Job Tracker position was never implemented. Instead, the role was divided between the TANF case manager and the JOBS coordinator both helping and encouraging the client to satisfy program requirements such as going to appointments, getting to job interviews, and getting to work. Part troubleshooting, part support network, the mentor aspect of the Fresh Start program helped clients stay on track and address barriers to self-sufficiency at times when the individual may have difficulty doing so on their own. Examples of support include crisis intervention, goal setting, money management, parenting skills, and daily living skills improvement.

1.4.4 Twin Approach -- Education/Training or Work Track

A significant departure from the standard approach is the emphasis placed on education and training. The weak economy on the reservation means there are few entry level, low skill jobs usually sought by TANF clients as compared to urban areas such as Fargo or Grand Forks. Jobs available typically require some skills and education. Fresh Start Center clients are placed on one of two tracks.

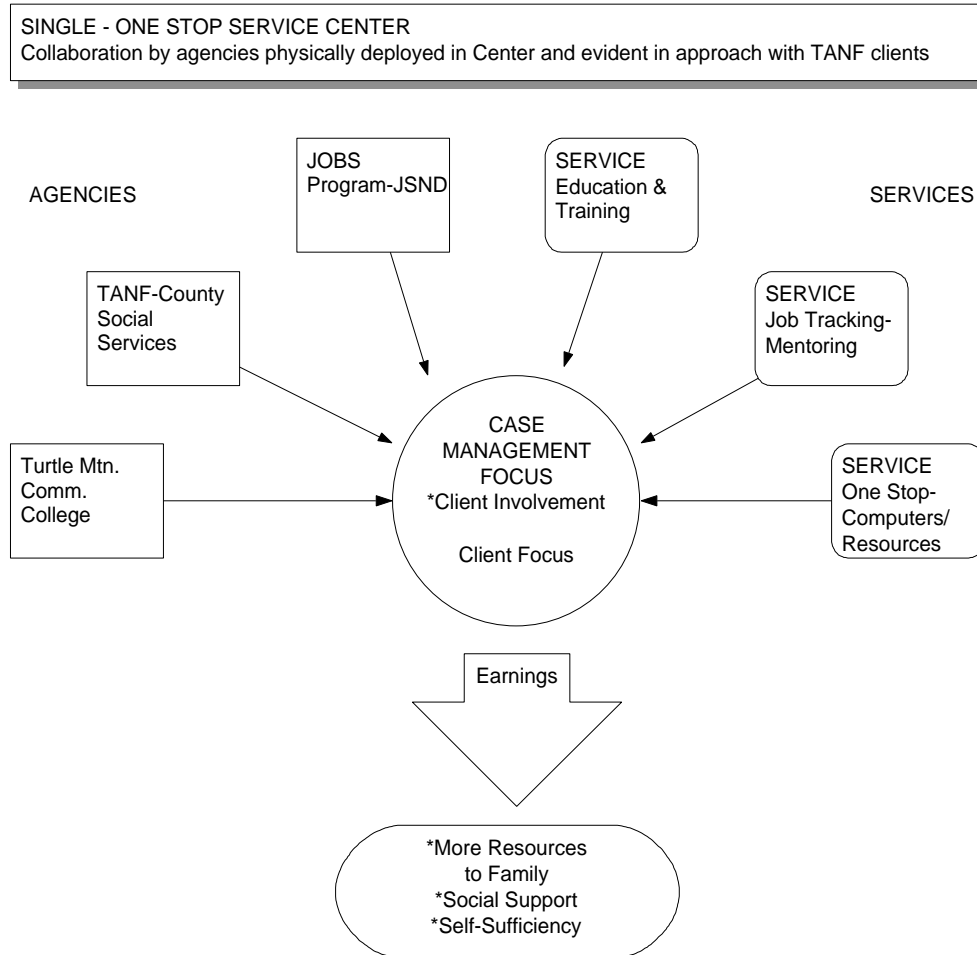
The education track includes a semester long course for college credit covering aspects of the work world. Math skills, writing, job research and other skills are also covered. Instructors were from the Jobs Opportunities for Low Income people (JOLI) program at the Turtle Mountain Community College. Students perform tasks related to various jobs and the process of obtaining those jobs. These practical efforts were integrated with skill development. For example, the student may go out to a job site to learn about the work and then return to the Center to do further library research and complete a paper. Several skills were developed along with knowledge of job and career options. After graduation from the course, students directed their efforts at actually getting a job. Center staff and clients report that area employers have come to positively view Fresh Start Center graduation as an important credential to consider in making a hiring decision (Focus group 2002).

The JOLI program no longer exists. Instructors from Turtle Mountain Community College teach the class funded under contract with the Department of Human Services.

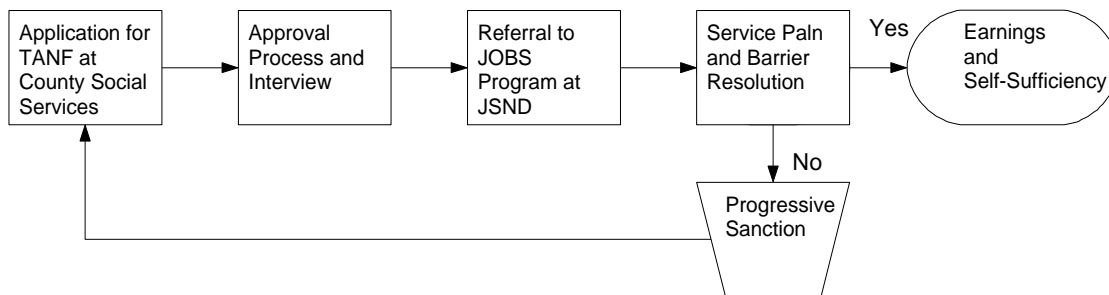
The Work/Job Search Track group moves directly to job search. This includes actual job search and learning related skills such as research and resume writing. These clients are supported by the services at the Fresh Start Center and monitored by the TANF case manager and JOBS coordinator in their Job Tracker roles.

Figure 3. Comparative Views of TANF Program Delivery

FRESH START CENTER - CASE MANAGEMENT PARADIGM



STANDARD PROCESS



2. STUDY METHODOLOGY

The planning documents outlined goals and objectives. Some were implementation oriented such as locating a building and developing community support. For the purposes of this report, the evaluation focuses on outcomes for clients. This section lays out the approach used to assess the project.

2.1 Research Questions

The Department undertakes the evaluation of the pilot projects with policy analysis staff from the Public Assistance Division and the Division of Research and Statistics with the purpose of understanding outcomes and describing the service delivery processes. To those ends, four overall research questions were developed with emphasis on client outcomes.

Did FSC participants meet goals and objectives as stated in the planning documents?

How did FSC participants do compared with similar non-FSC clients?

What did clients think of the FSC and its services?

Can any positive outcomes for clients be attributed to the FSC?

Specifically, the FSC planning document included four client outcome objectives.

Objective 4.1 – 50% in the work portion of the project will successfully complete and 60% of the participants involved in the educational component will successfully complete that portion.

Objective 4.2 – 75% of all Fresh Start participants will be placed into work activities.

Objective 5.2 - Increase participant success in obtaining employment.

Objective 5.3. – Increase participant success in retaining paid employment.

The planning document also called for a survey of clients for perceptions of the FSC.

Objective 6.1. – [A] client satisfaction survey will be used to provide feedback to project staff on possible improvements to the project.

2.2 Data Sources

The evaluation of the pilot project was conducted starting in fall 2002 using program administrative data, interviews with program staff, client surveys, and a focus group discussion with former participants.

Administrative data reside in several locations. Information concerning cases, recipients, payments, and work activity, is captured on the state's VISION computer system. This system is

used for case management, to make payments for cases, and to report on economic assistance programs, including TANF. These data reside in DB2 tabular format. Other economic assistance program data is stored in ADATABASE format through the TECS administrative system. Quarterly earnings data is obtained through agreement with Job Service North Dakota by means of a data exchange.

2.3. General Approach and Hypotheses

Although setting forth goals and objectives, much of the content of the planning document was the implementation approach. Some specific objectives were performance measures that contain quantifiable and measurable targets. Others provide direction and it has been the task of this evaluation to operationalize their measurement. From these intents an evaluation plan was developed and hypotheses generated.

H1: Fresh Start Center client outcomes will be better than comparable TANF clients in Rolette County.

H2: The Fresh Start Center is the cause of the observed improvements.

2.4 Validity Concerns

The present evaluation presents several areas of potential concern for validity of the data and analysis. First is the lack of an experimental design with random assignment of participants to a test group and control group. This concern is heightened with the Fresh Start Center study because a comparison between participants and similarly situated non-participants was a requested part of the analysis. The concern arises because there is both self-selection and recruitment of participants for the Center.

A comparison with non-participants may be of interest. It is even possible that differences observed were brought about by the Fresh Start Center. However, there is the strong danger that because of other differences readers could conclude more results from the FSC than are warranted. Random assignment would help preclude other influences to participant outcomes.

That people can choose to be in the Fresh Start program may distort the picture. The traits and motivations that led to any success in entering the labor force may be what also led them to the Fresh Start Center. So the positive outcome compared with others would be less influenced by the pilot project.

Client outcome measures were based on administrative data. Administrative data offers a wealth of useful information. It, however, is collected, not with research in mind, but to administer the program. There may be an inherent distortion built in and there are definitely limitations. Similar evaluations in other states have combined administrative data with surveys of clients. Moreover, while client surveys have their own limitations, the combination provides a more robust view and each can serve as a check on the other (ASPE 2001). For client outcomes, this evaluation relies primarily on administrative data along with insights provided through interviews with program staff, the input from client a satisfaction survey, and focus groups.

Another consideration for validity is the sample size. Here we used the entire population of the pilot project clients and a sample of TANF clients as a comparison group. The FSC selection criteria were used to develop the comparison sample group. To be included in the comparison

sample group the individual must have been on TANF in Rolette County between September 1999 and December 2000, have a high school diploma or GED, and be an adult caretaker head of household who was included in the TANF grant. Selection was by a random choice of 121 cases from all cases open during that period. Of those, the cases matching the selection criteria were used for the comparison group consisting of 57 individuals.

Another concern is the nature of pilot projects. Staff understands that they are involved in a pilot project and that its outcomes are being watched. In addition, with their personal investment in the design and implementation of the project, there may be influences present that affect outcomes that would not be present were this the standard operating procedure.

A survey was given to all clients to gauge customer satisfaction with the facility and services. Likely the most significant threat to validity of the survey was the manner it was administered. The survey was given to participants by FSC staff, not independent researchers. Although not likely, clients may have perceived some pressure to respond in a positive manner.

The validity concerns are mentioned so the reader can maintain some skeptical objectivity. The research staff is most concerned by the use of a comparison group in lieu of a true control group. While it provides an insight, such a practice does not confirm the causal conclusion that a true experimental design would provide.

3. FINDINGS

3.1 Basic Demographics

This section describes the basic demographic characteristics of FSC participants and a comparison group.

Figure 4. Basic Demographic Characteristics

	FSC Participants	Comparison Group
Sample (N)	48	56
Average Age of Adult	35.6	33.2
Avg. Age of Youngest Child	7.4	6.8
Avg. Number of Children	2.4	2.3
Avg. Years of Education	12.0	11.5
Percent with Sanctions pre-FSC	8.3%	19.6%
Percent w/Sanctions during FSC	18.8%	46.4%

3.2 Outcomes

3.2.1 Analysis of Administrative Data

Leaving TANF

In the statewide TANF program, the overall goal is to provide temporary assistance while helping to improve self-sufficiency, likewise with the Fresh Start Center. Although not explicitly stated in the planning documents, the goal is to improve self-sufficiency with families leaving cash assistance. As in other studies, the rate of TANF exit is of interest. Figure 5. shows a comparison of those involved in the Fresh Start Center and a comparison group of Rolette County TANF clients.

Figure 5. TANF Exit and Return

	Fresh Start Center Participants		Non-FSC Comparison Group		Cross Tabulation Sommer's d	
	N	%	N	%	T - score	Sign.
Left TANF During FSC Study Period	22	46.8%	31	56.4	-0.967	0.334
Left within One-Year	27	57.4%	34	61.8%	-0.449	0.654
Still Off TANF One-Year Later*	21	77.8%	19	55.9%	1.047	0.295

*Expressed as percentage of those who left within one year.

The statistical test used was Sommer's d cross tabulation with T-scores and significance shown in the table. The differences were not statistically significant.

Recidivism

Figure 5. also provides a look at recidivism. FSC participants were better able to remain off TANF; 77.8% were still off TANF one-year later compared to 55.9% for the comparison group. However, this is still not a statistically significant result.

It appears that those in the Fresh Start Center do not leave TANF as quickly as non-participants (46.8% vs. 56.4%). The difference, shown in Figure 5. is slight and not statistically significant. The program's use of a semester long education course works to keep people out of the job market during the education period. While in the education course the client is not looking for a job and will remain on TANF. This delay may contribute to the slightly lower rate of labor force attachment.

Sanctions

A sanction results in a reduction of the TANF grant by the amount normally paid for the adult in the TANF family. Those adults who receive a grant are required to participate in work activities. Failure to do so may result in a JOBS sanction. A TANF adult may be sanctioned for failure to cooperate with Child Support Enforcement (CSE). This study does not consider CSE sanctions, as FSC efforts do not affect CSE policies. In families where the relative caretaker is not a parent, that individual might not be paid a grant for themselves. The FSC targeted only those cases where an adult was included in the TANF grant. This section discusses only JOBS sanctions.

A look at JOBS sanctions was not contemplated in the original planning documents. Other pilot projects have modified sanction policy. In addition, the Department changed the statewide sanction policy in March 2003. Therefore, there is recent interest in the effects of sanctions. Thus, comparative analysis of sanction is of broader interest.

Figure 6. Sanction Patterns

	FSC Participants Total N = 48		Non-FSC Comparison Group Total N = 56		Co-Relation Test Pearson's R	
	N	%	N	%	T	Sign.
Sanctioned at Any Time	12	25.0%	26	46.4%	2.298	0.024**
Sanctioned Prior to Fresh Start Period	4	8.3%	9	16.1%	1.642	0.104
During Fresh Start Period	9	18.8%	25	44.6%	3.084	0.003***

** Significant to 95%

***Significant to 99%

The test of statistical significance used for sanction data was Pearson's R test of co-relation; T scores and significance are noted on the table.

Figure 7. Rate of Sanction

Per Capita Total Months of Sanction	FSC Participants	Non-FSC Comparison Group
--for all Clients	0.9 months	2.1 months
--for Clients with Sanctions	3.6 months	4.5 months

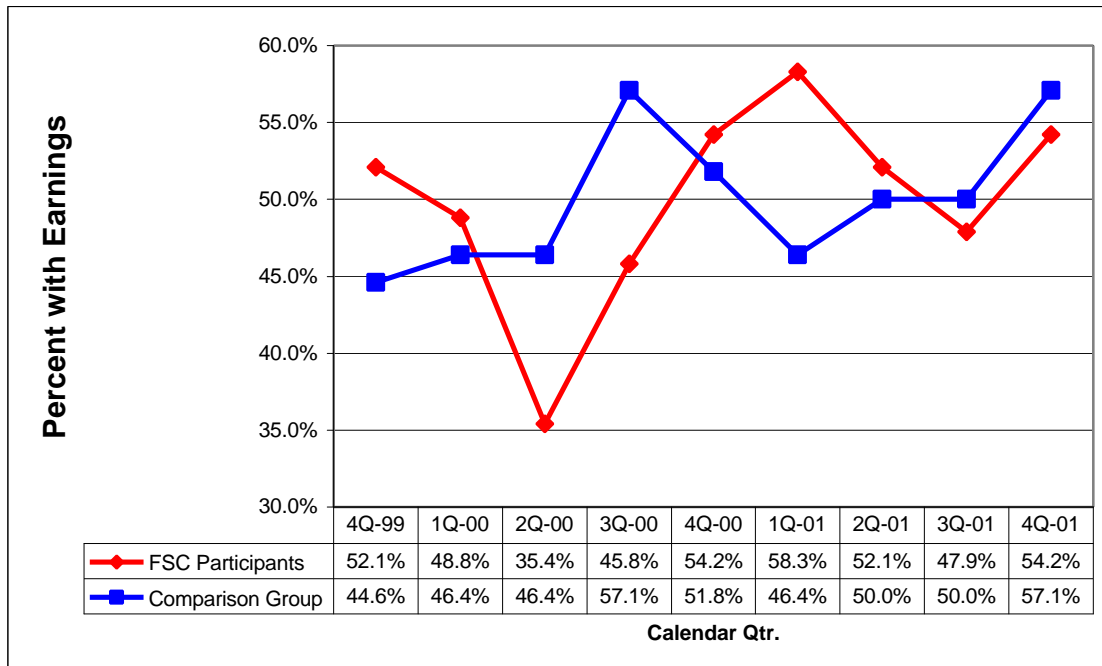
The Fresh Start Center participants are about one-half as likely to have had sanctions before their start in the program (8.3% versus 19.6%). Well less than half as many Fresh Start clients than the comparison group received sanctions during the Fresh Start period and, overall, nearly half as many had any sanction. The differences are statistically significant during the Fresh Start period and overall.

Likewise, the number of months of sanction is much lower for the Fresh Start Center participants at an average of 3.6 months of sanction for those with sanctions compared to 4.5 months for non-participants. Looking at the entire membership of each group the FSC clients had 0.9 average months of sanction per individual for all, while non-FSC TANF clients had a per capita of 2.1 months of sanction.

Earnings

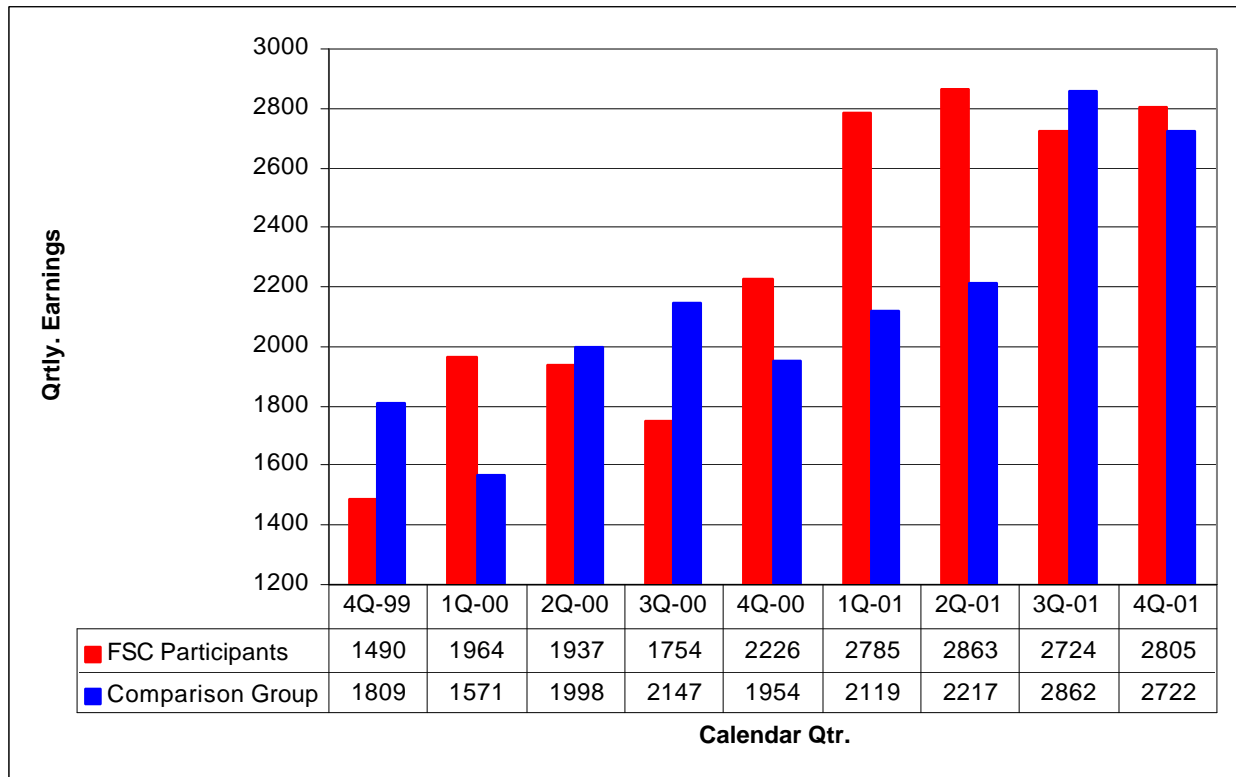
Data on earnings were collected from two sources. From DHS sources, those clients still involved with TANF or Food Stamps would report earnings. Department data was gathered from the Vision system and TECS. The other source was Unemployment Insurance earnings data from Job Service North Dakota. Where a client had differing amounts in the various data sources, the highest amount was used. Earnings are on a quarterly basis.

Figure 8. Percentage of Clients with Earnings



Source: UI Data JSND and NDDHS Vision System and TECS administrative systems. Computations by author.

Figure 9. Mean Quarterly Earnings



Source: UI Data JSND and NDDHS Vision System and TECS administrative systems. Computations by author.

The comparison between groups does not really indicate a great difference either in the rate TANF clients got jobs or in average earnings. The FSC participants initially have a lower rate of employment—only 35.4 % in the second quarter of 2000. However, given the initial emphasis on education, a delay in labor force participation is to be expected. Later quarters show improvement.

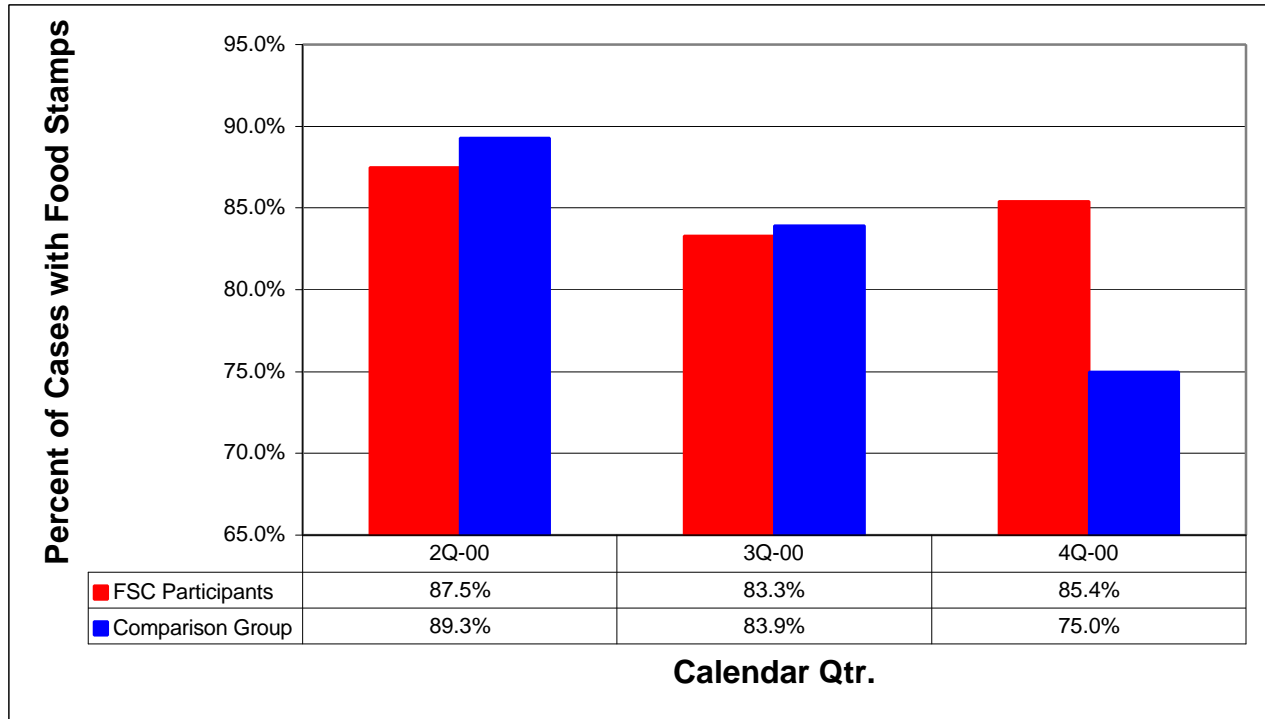
The quarterly earnings improve after FSC involvement. In some quarters, the average earnings outpace the comparison group. In tests of statistical significance, only 1Q-01 differences are significant. Following the trend an observer may notice that FSC participants improved earnings before the comparison group. This may indicate a greater awareness of job opportunities, stronger job search skills, or motivation among FSC clients who more quickly take advantage of job openings.

Food Stamp Usage

The interest in Food Stamp usage was discussed among program administrators. Concern from several quarters was that with welfare reform, many clients who left TANF would leave other assistance programs for which they were otherwise eligible. The result would be fewer resources for families in a fragile financial position as they transitioned to greater self-sufficiency. Fewer resources than what they were entitled to might mean some hardship and could contribute to recidivism to the cash assistance TANF program. Clients with a stronger connection to the economic assistance programs would be better assisted in their efforts toward self-sufficiency. So, even though among the first steps

toward self-sufficiency would be ending TANF program involvement, it would include continued utilization of other assistance to provide a more stable transition. This study looks at Food Stamp use during the later portion of the Fresh Start period.

Figure 10. Food Stamp Usage



Source: ND DHS TECS administrative system. Computations by author.

As seen in Figure 10., even while those who left TANF during the period was the same for both groups, a smaller percentage of the comparison group utilized Food Stamps in the later period. It is believed that the better relationship between the client and the program staff improves understanding of supports that remain available after a client leaves TANF.

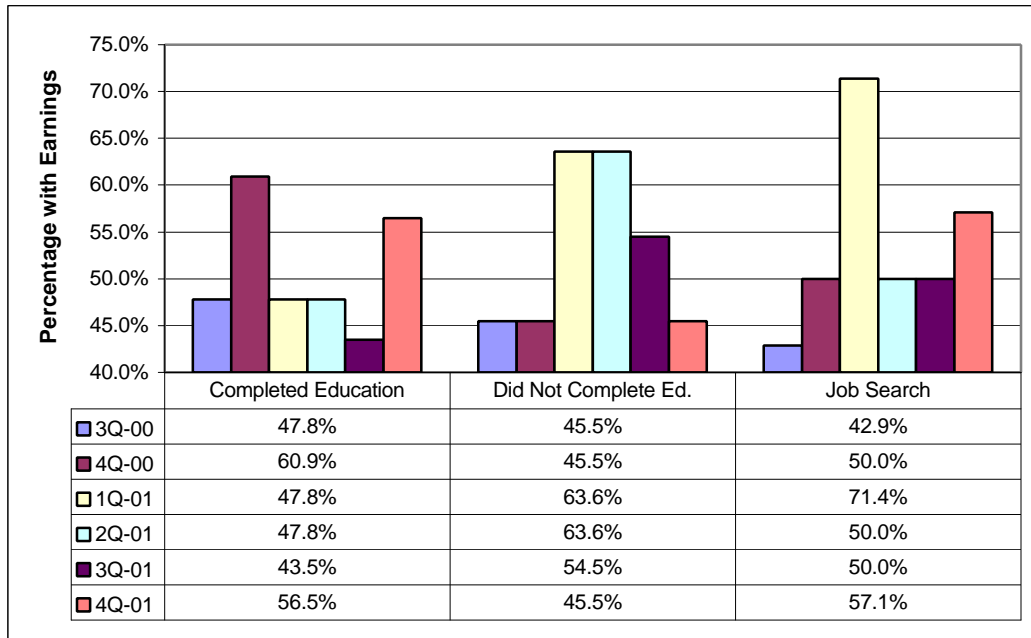
Differences Among Fresh Start Participants

Fresh Start participants belong to one of three types: those who were involved in the education component and were able to complete that piece; those who started, but did not complete the education component¹; and those not in the education component but moved directly into job search. The expectation is the third group would find employment more quickly.

The planning document stated objectives for these sub-groups. Hence, this report looks at the rate of employment and average earnings for each.

¹This should not necessarily be considered a negative classification. A common reason for not completing the education component was becoming employed, sometimes with enough earnings to close the TANF case.

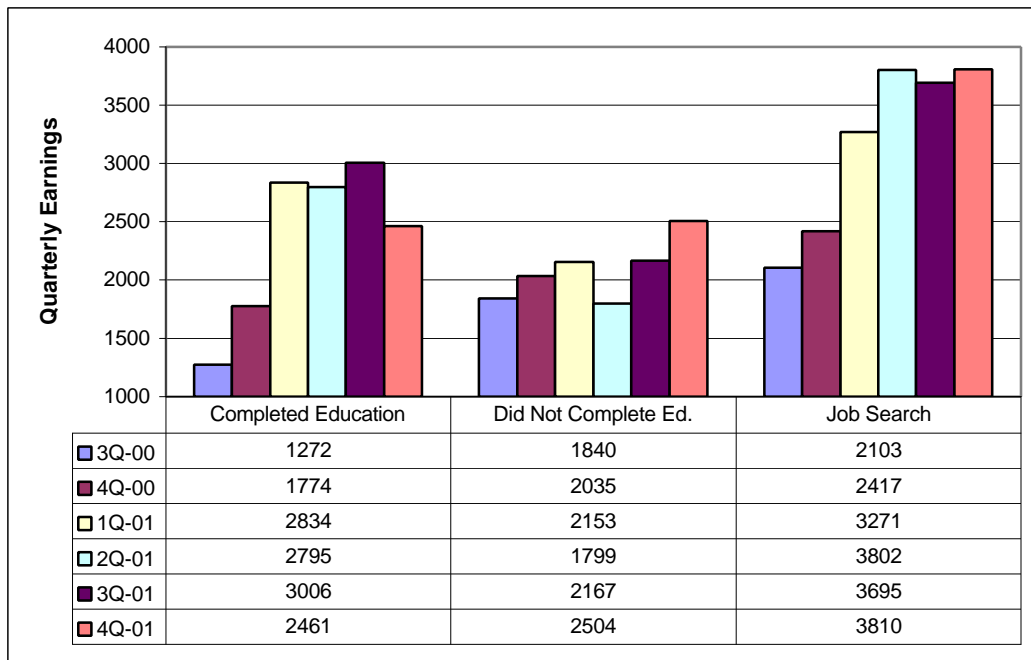
Figure 11. Fresh Start Center Groups – Percentage with Earnings



Sources: Fresh Start Center files, JSND UI earnings data.

The amount of earnings is also of interest. Figure 12. shows how each sub-group had earnings change (increase) over time. The chart shows, for each group, the quarterly, average earnings from third quarter 2000 through the end of 2001.

Figure 12. Fresh Start Center Groups—Average Quarterly Earnings



Source: Fresh Start Center files, JSND UI earnings data.

Earnings started stronger for those in the work component and improved over time. For the other groups there was also improvement over time but not reaching the levels of the

work group. While dramatic, these results need to be kept in perspective. The number of participants in any group is quite small and the number with earnings is smaller yet. The largest group in any period has 13 people ($N = 13$). The data only suggests an outcome; with the small sample sizes, it cannot be held as conclusive.

Other Correlations

Analyses performed on the relationship between earnings over time versus other demographic and program characteristics provided three significant co-relations. The number of months a person is on TANF is inversely related to the amount of earnings over time. The relationship is only mild and was only statistically significant in one quarter (sign. = 0.058, 3Q-01). This means that the more months a person is on TANF the lower the earnings.

A second correlation was found between the level of education and earnings. Here the co-relation is positive meaning that higher education means higher earnings. The finding is only statistically significant in the last quarter of available data (sig. = 0.096, 4Q-01).

Thirdly, there is a co-relation between sanctions received during the Fresh Start period (4Q-99 to 4Q-00) and earnings through the last quarter of available data, 4Q-01, one year later. It is an inverse relationship meaning that having a sanction is related to lower earnings. Compared to others, this is a stronger relationship and is statistically significant in four of six quarters.

Co-relations are for both the FSC participants and the comparison group; there were no differences between groups. Also, the sample sizes are larger for the combined groups.

3.2.2 Customer Satisfaction Survey Results

Fresh Start participants were asked to complete a customer satisfaction survey toward the end of their first semester of involvement. For the clients in the classroom portion this meant the survey was given a week or two before graduation. The survey was given to all clients but had a section that applied only to those in the classroom portion.

There was a near term interest in the survey results. Program staff reviewed the responses each semester and made modifications, if indicated.

A cumulative view of the survey responses is presented below.

Figure 13. Survey Results

	Very Helpful	Somewhat Helpful	Not at all Helpful
<i>The Job Tracker helped me understand some important things about work.</i>	84%	16%	
<i>The Job Tracker helped me understand the needs of my employer.</i>	84%	16%	
<i>The Job Tracker helped my employer understand some needs I have.</i>	66%	31%	3%
<i>The Job Tracker helped me keep my job.</i>	63%	30%	7%
<i>How helpful is the Job Tracker?</i>	89%	11%	
<i>Rate how helpful you found the Employability Development Plan.</i>	73%	27%	
<i>How would you rate the quality of the classroom instruction?</i>	94%	6%	
<i>Classroom element-Resume writing</i>	82%	15%	3%
<i>Classroom element-Job Search skills</i>	94%	6%	
<i>Classroom element-Learning about different jobs</i>	100%		
<i>Classroom element-Life Skills videos</i>	72%	28%	
<i>Classroom element-Interaction with other participants</i>	91%	9%	
<i>Classroom element-Skills review: math, language, etc.</i>	84%	16%	
<i>Classroom element-Work place expectations</i>	84%	16%	

Figure 14. Survey Results – Part 2

Opinions of the Center	Very Good	Good	Average	Poor	Very Poor
<i>-comfort</i>	68%	27%	5%		
<i>-access to computers*</i>	59%	22%	16%		3%
<i>-convenience (location, hours)</i>	73%	19%	8%		
<i>-availability of Job Service services</i>	81%	16%	3%		
<i>-availability of Rolette County services</i>	78%	13%	9%		

*During the first semester, some of the computers had not yet arrived.

Figure 15. Client Ranking of Usefulness of FSC Components and Classroom Subjects

Rank	Fresh Start Center Component
1 st	Location of the Center in Belcourt
2 nd	Classroom Training
3 rd	Employability Development Plan
4 th	Availability of Computers
5 th	Job Coach/Job Tracker*

Rank	Classroom Subject
1 st	Learning about different jobs
2 nd	Talking with other participants
2 nd	Resume writing
4 th	Job search skills
5 th	Learning about employer's expectations
6 th	Skills review: math and language
7 th	Life Skills video series

*The JobTracker duties were distributed to the JOBS Coordinator (primarily) and the TANF case manager. It was not a separate position.

3.2.3 Focus Groups

Two focus group sessions were conducted during a visit to the Center, one with clients and one with agency stakeholders. Observations from those sessions are of a qualitative nature and are folded into the narrative in the Discussion section.

4. DISCUSSION

There are two planes of evaluation for this pilot project. First is the inside plane. In the original planning document several of the goals and objectives were of an implementation or operational nature. These dealt with the start-up of the Fresh Start program and delivery of services. While process measures are thought secondary to outcome measures in today's performance oriented management imperative, they remain important to those who administer the program, even those that are not quantifiable. These process items are not addressed by this study. Much of that material is sought and gained informally by the individual stakeholders in the course of program administration. Feedback from staff and participants and meeting the daily physical needs of the Center constitute a type of measurement of related goals and objectives.

On a second plane are the outside interests. The Department of Human Services is interested in client outcomes achieved through pilot projects. Some outcome objectives are outlined in the planning document. Other items of interest have been developed from a general understanding gained from the operation of the statewide TANF program and observation of other pilot projects. This overview perspective and total program responsibility gives the Department a different requirement for evaluation. The Department's interest is to learn about outcomes from pilot projects that could be beneficial to the larger program. This study concentrates on measurable client outcomes whether or not included in the original planning document.

4.1 Planning Objectives and Goals

This section addresses those objectives and goals in the planning document that speak to client outcomes. Following are the measurable objectives and a summary of findings.

- **Objective: 30 – 50 participants in program in the first year**
Outcome: 48 were served by the Fresh Start program in the first year.
- **Objective: 50% of participants in the work/job search portion will complete the program**
Outcome: There were 14 clients in the work portion. Nine (55%) completed the program. Five (36%) were employed and four (29%) were involved with further education and training at the end of the period.
- **Objective: 60% of participants in the education component will complete the program**
Outcome: Twenty-three of 34 clients involved in the education component completed the program (67.6%).
- **Objective: 75% of participants will be involved in work activities as defined in federal law**
Outcome: Review of the Federal TANF Data Report was done for the months after the first year of the Fresh Start Center, July 2000 to December 2000, in order to learn the extent that clients participated in work activities.

July 2000	67.4%
August 2000	81.4%
September 2000	76.7%
October 2000	79.2%

November 2000	79.2%
December 2000	72.9%
Average	76.1%

- **Objective: Increase participant success in obtaining paid employment**
- **Objective: Increase participant success in retaining paid employment**
Outcome: The eight quarters of earnings data available show an increasing trend in the percentage of participants with earnings. Figure 8. showed a large jump in employment on completion of the Fresh Start program. The planning document did not outline specific numeric targets for these objectives.

In addition, goals and objectives included items such as procuring and renting a suitable building, informing clients about the Center, staffing, etc. The Fresh Start Center largely met the goals and objectives stated in its planning document.

4.2 Hypothesis Tests

In the planning document, there was the plan to compare Fresh Start participants with a random group of TANF clients in Rolette County with similar traits. The section on Methodology discussed the problems with the approach used. Nevertheless, within those confines and based on the original plan, the study puts forward two hypotheses.

H1: Fresh Start Center client outcomes will be better than comparable TANF clients in Rolette County.

To address this question the study presents findings on the percentage of those with earnings, the average earnings, and use of food stamps for both FSC participants and the comparison group. The data indicates that participants delayed their involvement in the labor force while engaged in the Fresh Start Center. After completion of the Fresh Start program, both the rate of employment and the average earnings of those employed increased markedly. The immediate improvement after Fresh Start involvement is a positive indicator. The comparison group does better initially, lags in the intermediate period, and eventually catches up to the Fresh Start group in terms of both earnings and the percentage of those with earnings.

There has been concern since the early days for welfare reform, that individuals who leave TANF might not continue their use of other assistance programs for which they remained entitled. The concern was that this meant fewer resources for families transitioning off TANF meaning increased difficulties during that delicate period. The reduced resources and disconnection from the support system is thought to lead to more recidivism, the return to welfare. The findings show that more FSC participants continued to use Food Stamps a year later than the comparison group even though the two groups have similar rates of employment and earnings.

While clients from both groups left TANF at the same rate, those in the Fresh Start program were better able to remain off TANF. One year later, 77.8% of FSC participants and 55.9% of the comparison group were still off TANF. FSC participants had fewer sanctions and for a shorter length of time.

Data presented shows some differences between the FSC clients and comparable TANF clients in Rolette County. On the face, we can accept the hypothesis. There remains concern. The differences are not that large, often are not statistically significant, and diminish over time.

H2: The Fresh Start Center is the cause of the observed improvements.

If we accept there are better outcomes for Fresh Start participants, then the next question is what is the cause. There can be no definitive answer because the program was not structured as a controlled experiment with subjects randomly assigned to test and control groups. The comparison group does not qualify as a control group. Additionally, people choose Fresh Start participation. It may be those who are predisposed toward success decide to enter the program or are recruited. An example is seen among sanctioned individuals. People with fewer sanctions participated in Fresh Start. This same group had fewer sanctions during the Fresh Start period. It is likely something about the individuals and not their participation in Fresh Start that resulted in fewer sanctions. It is also known that people with fewer sanctions do better in terms of employment, as noticed in this and other studies (ND DHS 2003).

We do, however, see program impacts. The sharp decline in employment and earnings for the Fresh Start group corresponds to the time in the education component after which there is a strong and sudden improvement. In addition, it was noted that FSC participants found jobs and improved wages sooner than non-FSC clients, appearing as though they were able to respond to economic opportunities more quickly. Further, there is the significant difference in TANF recidivism between the FSC group and comparison group. Those in the work/job search component show employment and earnings growth.

These are only mild correlations to the program. They can be explained by the mechanics of FSC participation, the classroom time, for example, but not necessarily tied to program content. The quantitative data does not provide strong support for a causal relationship between outcomes and the Fresh Start program.

4.3 Qualitative Observations

Client Attitudes

The administrative data only provides part of the picture. In the focus group session with current and former participants, some of the texture of the program's effect was evident. One very much gets the impression of a type of minor conversion experience for participants. In describing their experiences they used terms such as "whetted my appetite," "the referral helped me get a job and now I'm in management," "it's like they're [FSC staff] my husband," a reference by a client about the help she received from FSC staff in fixing some car problems.

Clients uniformly mentioned a major change while at the Fresh Start Center was that of changed attitude. This seems to have a two-way meaning. Clients perceived a change in attitude among staff that had previously been in separate agencies housed in offices in Rolla. Moreover, there is the change in attitude in the clients by responding to staff efforts to help and the Center's new environment. They cited feelings of "community, friends, support, and family" at the Fresh Start Center. Many former clients return to the Center but not to re-apply for TANF. If a problem arises, even if it is only the need to talk to someone, clients feel welcome to return. They can use the Center's computers for job search related tasks or seek advice from staff on dealing with life issues. Without the Fresh Start Center's availability in this role as personal support, the sense was that a number of clients would have lost jobs and returned to welfare.

One participant could not attend the focus group session; and, compelled to have a voice, wrote a testimonial letter. Some quotes—

...before I entered into Fresh Start I had no direction...I knew one person at Fresh Start that would talk of the program like it had so many opportunities and she would tell me to get involved. She told me to look at the bright side of things...that there was a beginning for everything; I just had to give myself some credit....much to my surprise, I did it....she did see something in me I did not...that I had a lot of talent and strength to be something...I love my job; it has taught me to socialize and to give myself every ounce of credit I deserve...I have learned to be a better mother by teaching my son better ways of life.....someday I would like to go to college...couldn't have done it without you ALL.

The comments of those in attendance had a similar quality. For each, the first part of Fresh Start participation was the most difficult. There were expectations. Center staff in their roles as Job Tracker called people who were late. They called people who missed work. They made many calls, enough that participants laughed in agreement when someone tossed out the epithet, “evil witch.” Nevertheless, as clients learned, many of those calls were to others on their behalf. The role of Job Tracker also helped find alternative child care, made doctor appointments, figured out transportation when a car broke down, helped track down someway to fix that car. In a few weeks, it all comes together according to the clients. “You understand they’re working for you. It is a good thing.” Participants report that at that point the staff became their friends and supporters. Part of the motivation to become employed is the sense, on the client’s part, of being part of a team that is working to make things better for themselves and their children. For many the Fresh Start Center makes the road off welfare a positive, life transforming experience.

Another dimension of client attitudes are those shown toward the Center itself. These were captured through the customer satisfaction survey and were presented in Figures 13-15.

Insights into the experience of those in the comparison group are not available. Their agency contact, especially concerning the JOBS program, would be with the Rolla office of Job Service North Dakota. In this evaluation, no survey or contact was made with non-FSC clients.

Staff Observations

One afternoon of the site visit was devoted to a discussion among stakeholder staff. Their observations and input contributed to the direction of this study and helped to frame some of the analysis. In addition to their general comments were two themes of special note for program administration.

That the Fresh Start Center even exists is surprising. Since it brings together so many agencies, the removal of any one would result in the end of the program. The collaborative arrangement presents organizational challenges. For example, staffing issues, since each staff person works for a different agency, they report to different supervisors, so common administrative questions become difficult because no one person or agency is in charge. The stakeholders thought the program could be improved and be made more sustainable if there were a single individual

program coordinator to make decisions on behalf of the FSC without having to constantly check with each of the constituent agencies.

Secondly, like staff at other pilot projects, those at the Fresh Start Center noted a need among clients for mental health and substance abuse services. At a minimum, they would like to see a counselor train FSC staff in screening and recognition of client symptoms. Better yet would be a staff person with expertise in mental health counseling to work at the Center. With the unique environment that develops at the FSC, staff believes that an on-site counselor would be part of the “family.” The experience in Cass County with a half-time counselor on staff provides a model that might be useful at the FSC.

Local Labor Market

The staff mentioned that one hurdle for clients is the lack of entry-level jobs in Rolette County. This is an observation that has shown up in the administrative data on wages. Those counties with a more vibrant economy, such as Cass County, actually show employed TANF clients and former clients receiving less in wages. This is thought due to a supply of low wage, part-time entry-level jobs. In Rolette County, the average wage for those clients who become employed is higher, but given the large case rolls and the unemployment rates, it is more difficult to become employed. There are few entry-level jobs. Jobs that become available have more requirements. Employers ask for better education credentials. This is one reason for the emphasis on the education at the Fresh Start Center.

With this need for education, non-TANF people in Belcourt are requesting to be involved in the Fresh Start Center and JOLI program. People in Fresh Start earn a *de facto* credential recognized by area employers.

Based on a combination of some mildly suggestive quantitative data and positive qualitative observations, the hypothesis is accepted that the Fresh Start Center has a mild causal influence on positive outcomes for participants.

Reservations

Any causal relationship is tenuous at best. Moreover, findings indicating such a relationship is modest to the point of near coincidence. The Fresh Start Center seems to provide those with some predisposition, a base of support and a structure to focus their efforts toward self-sufficiency. The small numbers make it difficult to draw substantive conclusions.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusions

1. Did the FSC work?

Yes. However, the connection between the efforts of the Fresh Start program and client outcomes is weak. Likely, the Job Tracker duties are the strongest component of the FS program. In looking at the sub-groups within the Fresh Start program, the work/job search group had the best performance in terms of employment and earnings. This finding is in line with what has been seen in other pilot projects—Williams County with a mentor and a case management approach; Cass County also has a case management approach with a mental health and substance abuse counselor; and, anecdotal information from the pilot project in the Grand Forks County Mentor program. In all these areas, the common factor is a case management approach that develops trust with the client and takes added steps to promote compliance with program requirements.

2. How does it help?

As noted above the Job Tracker efforts are likely the main cause. The study only looks at two years of data. Less tangible benefits such as improvements in self-esteem and confidence may result in better outcomes over a longer period. The support network resulting from Fresh Start involvement may contribute to the ability of participants to stay off TANF after leaving and their increased use of Food Stamps.

The case management is an essential element that brings the various services together and develops the relationship with the client. With a sometimes disconcerting affect on the client, at least initially, both the TANF case manager and the JOBS Coordinator employing the Job Tracker duties communicate the self-reliance message while providing tangible life assistance sometimes as important as the cash benefit itself.

The location and combined services of the Fresh Start Center likely provides an opportunity. That difference alone, rather than travel to Rolla, might mean some clients connect with service than would have otherwise.

That the FSC has limited enrollment, and may appear to confer some added benefit to clients, might give it an appeal. This appeal may serve as a motivation for TANF clients to choose FSC involvement. That it is not a broad, serve all program might also help participants stay motivated while in the program. Expansion may dilute the effects.

3. Why differences among Fresh Start groups?

Those participants in the work/job search portion start immediately at job search and related activities. The findings show that they more rapidly find employment and subsequently see increases in earnings. In addition, the work/job group is subject to the Job Tracker efforts of the FSC staff. The education group, for those who complete the course, are effectively out of the labor market for that period. They do find employment after completion, but not at the rate or at the wage level of the work/job search group. One explanation offered by staff and noticed in the focus group discussion, is that after a taste of education, a number of those clients continue into higher education or further specific vocational training. They remain out of the labor market or work reduced hours to accommodate their education efforts. The third group is those who start in the

education component but do not complete. Initially, they are more likely to be employed and have higher earnings than the other education group. Often it is because of a job that individuals leave the education component or the Fresh Start program. Over a longer term, (one year later) both the rate of employment and earnings for the education non-completer group are below the other two. Further study would be required to observe the full effect of the education/training component.

5.2 Recommendations

- **Keep the Fresh Start Center functioning.** The availability of a program provides clients, who have some amount of self-motivation, a path off TANF.
- **Serve people in the work/job search component.** The program should focus on the services of the Job Tracker whether as a separate position or with those duties given to other staff.
- **Have mental health counseling available from the Fresh Start Center.** Coordinate with the Lake Region Human Service Center or other providers to make services available to clients in the Belcourt area even when the case management resides in the Rolla County social service office.
- **Establish a stronger management structure for the Center.**
- **For future projects, use a stronger evaluation design with random assignment of individuals to test and control groups.**
- **Conduct a study that includes surveys and interviews with TANF clients, especially those who have been sanctioned.** This would supplement secondary data analysis from administrative systems with a real client voice. Consider the possibility of utilizing Quality Control staff that currently interviews economic assistance clients.
- **Perform a cost benefit analysis.** Develop analytical skills to discuss projects, policies, and special services in cost-benefit terms.
- **Involve evaluation staff in the early planning stages of pilot projects.** Better define goals, objectives and select appropriate measures.
- **Explore ways to improve coordination of services and benefits among all economic assistance programs.**

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